Fragments, flavors, and flowers: literary reconstructions of *postmemory* in contemporary children's books

Fragmentos, sabores y flores: reconstrucciones literarias de la *posmemoria* en libros infantiles contemporáneos

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Enviado: 01/09/2026
Aceptado: 07/11/2026

Abstract: This study examines how contemporary children's books represent *postmemory* and the intergenerational transmission of experiences of war, displacement, hunger, and loss. It focuses on *My Tzieri 1922* by Fotini Stephanidi (2022), *The Memory Cake* by Caroline L. Perry, illustrated by Jen Bricking (2025), and *The Sunflowers Babushka Planted* by Beatrice Rendón, illustrated by Olga Baumert (2024). Adopting a qualitative comparative multimodal analysis, the study examines the books through three interrelated dimensions**:** Inherited Memory**,** Material Mediation**,** and Reconstruction. The first explores how family narratives, relationships, and traces of the past construct intergenerational memory; the second focuses on how objects, images, sensory practices, and spaces mediate access to the past; and the third investigates how the past is reassembled and re-signified in the present. The analysis demonstrates that the books represent *postmemory* not as the static transmission of a completed past, but as a dynamic, material, and multimodal process. Through intergenerational relationships and the interaction of narrative, image, materiality, sensory experience, and place, an unexperienced past becomes perceptible and meaningful to younger generations. Ultimately, loss becomes creation, resilience, hope, and continuity.

Keywords: Postmemory. Intergenerational Memory. Multimodality. Materiality. Children's Books.

Resumen: Este estudio examina cómo los libros infantiles contemporáneos representan la *posmemoria* y la transmisión intergeneracional de experiencias de guerra, desplazamiento, hambre y pérdida. El análisis se centra en *My Tzieri 1922*, de Fotini Stephanidi (2022), *The Memory Cake*, de Caroline L. Perry, ilustrado por Jen Bricking (2025), y *The Sunflowers Babushka Planted*, de Beatrice Rendón, ilustrado por Olga Baumert (2024). Mediante un análisis multimodal comparativo de carácter cualitativo, el estudio aborda estas obras a partir de tres dimensiones interrelacionadas: Memoria heredada, Mediación material y Reconstrucción. La primera examina cómo las narrativas familiares, las relaciones intergeneracionales y las huellas del pasado configuran la memoria heredada; la segunda analiza el papel de los objetos, las imágenes, las prácticas sensoriales y los espacios en la mediación del pasado; y la tercera explora cómo este se reensambla y resignifica en el presente. El análisis demuestra que los libros no presentan la *posmemoria* como la transmisión estática de un pasado concluido, sino como un proceso dinámico, material y multimodal. A través de la narración, la imagen, la materialidad, los sentidos y el espacio, un pasado no vivido se vuelve significativo para las nuevas generaciones, transformando la pérdida en creación, resiliencia, esperanza y continuidad.

Palabras clave: Posmemoria. Memoria Intergeneracional. Multimodalidad. Materialidad. Literatura Infantil.

Memory extends beyond recalling personally experienced events. In the context of war, violence, displacement, and loss, the past may continue to affect generations who did not directly experience these events. They encounter them through family narratives, photographs, objects, everyday practices, emotional responses, and other forms of mediation. Marianne Hirsch (1997, 2012) uses the term *postmemory* to describe the relationship subsequent generations form with experiences that preceded their birth or fell outside their direct experience but were transmitted with such intensity that they acquired profound emotional and imaginative significance. Postmemory thus involves engaging with an unexperienced past rather than directly recollecting it. It also involves how later generations interpret and reconstruct inherited experiences through the narratives and materials available to them.

Research on intergenerational memory in children's literature has increasingly examined how family relationships, material objects and visual narratives mediate the transmission of the past. Missiou (2024), for example, analyses French picturebooks about refugees of twentieth-century conflicts, exploring how family histories connect younger generations with historical events they did not experience and how this transmission involves both a duty to remember and nostalgia. Focusing on material mediation, Karaoğlu et al. (2023) examine how photographs and visual and verbal narrative strategies in *My Grandma's Photos* connect grandparents and grandchildren. Smyczyńska (2018), in turn, investigates biographical memory in visual narratives by Peter Sís, Uri Orlev and Marta Ignerska, highlighting the relationship between personal recollection, childhood and intergenerational connection. These studies show the significance of family relationships, material traces, and visual narration in transmitting memory. However, further attention is needed to how these elements interact in contemporary children's books about war and displacement, particularly in representing younger generations' engagement with inherited family histories. This study addresses this concern by examining how family testimony, sensory recollections, and visual representations mediate encounters with an unexperienced past.

The study examines three contemporary children's books: *My Tzieri, 1922* by Fotini Stephanidi (2022), *The Memory Cake* by Caroline L. Perry, illustrated by Jen Bricking (2025), and *The Sunflowers Babushka Planted* by Beatrice Rendón, illustrated by Olga Baumert (2024). They address three distinct historical contexts: the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922 and the subsequent displacement of Greek populations (Klapsis, 2014), the Siege of Malta during the Second World War, and the displacement of a Ukrainian family during the same war. Their selection rests on the explicit connections they establish between their narratives and family experiences transmitted across generations. Stephanidi identifies her grandmother as the narrative's source through the subtitle on the title page, *From My Grandmother Who Lived It*. Perry acknowledges her Maltese grandmother, Nanna Lina, as the inspiration for *The Memory Cake*, while Rendón relates her narrative to her grandmother's displacement from Kyiv during the Second World War. These paratextual references establish family experience as a starting point for representing wider historical events.

The books have also received positive critical attention. Reviews of *My Tzieri, 1922* highlight its interplay of text and image, visual artistry and emotional representation of family history (Kakourou-Chroni, 2022; Lasithiotaki, 2022; Pappos, 2022). Kirkus Reviews (2025) praises *The Memory Cake* for its portrayal of the Siege of Malta and its intergenerational perspective. In addition, *The Memory Cake* received the 2026 Christopher Award (Penguin Random House, 2026). Similarly, Lovsin (2024) praises *The Sunflowers Babushka Planted* for opening a gentle, empathetic discussion of refugees, displacement, and the immigrant experience. She also highlights how the watercolor and gouache illustrations connect the family's experiences during the Second World War with contemporary images of families

fleeing Ukraine. This reception provides further context for the book selection. The corpus deliberately brings together one illustrated book and two picturebooks. This distinction is analytically significant because the relationship between verbal narration, illustration, and documentary material varies across these forms, shaping how past experiences are contextualized and represented. Considered together, the books offer different narrative and visual possibilities for representing how younger generations encounter and interpret family memories of historical displacement.

The study adopts a qualitative comparative multimodal analysis of the three books. It examines how verbal and visual modes interact with the spatial and compositional organization of pages and spreads to construct representations of inherited memory. The analysis draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar and Nikolajeva and Scott's (2001) study of word–image relations. It considers features such as framing, perspective, salience, scale, and color, as well as the narrative functions of verbal and visual elements. The analysis is organized around three interrelated dimensions: Inherited Memory, Material Mediation, and Reconstruction. Inherited Memory examines how family relationships and narratives connect younger generations to past events. Material Mediation focuses on the objects, photographs, sensory experiences, and spaces through which inherited experiences become perceptible. Reconstruction considers how younger generations interpret and reassemble these traces in the present, giving new meaning to experiences they did not live through. Although analytically distinct, these dimensions are interconnected: family narratives transmit the past through material and sensory forms, while these forms provide resources for its subsequent interpretation.

Accordingly, the study asks: How do verbal and visual narrative strategies in the three books represent *postmemory*, and how do they enable younger generations to interpret and reconstruct inherited memories of war and displacement? It argues that the books present *postmemory* as an ongoing process of mediation and reconstruction, rather than as the straightforward transmission of a completed historical account. Through family relationships, material objects, sensory experiences, spaces, and visual narration, they make an unexperienced past perceptible while representing younger generations as active interpreters of inherited histories.

1. Theoretical Framework: *Postmemory*, Cultural Memory, and Materiality

Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* describes the relationship that later generations establish with experiences that preceded their own lives, particularly histories of violence, war, displacement, and loss (Hirsch, 1997, 2012). Such experiences reach younger generations through family narratives, photographs, objects, behaviors, and affective relationships. Although they have not experienced these events directly, subsequent generations may develop a profound emotional and imaginative connection to them. As Hirsch (2012) explains, this relationship is established "not by recall, but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (p. 5). Imagination is therefore central to how inherited experiences acquire meaning in the present. This concept is particularly relevant to the three books, in which children encounter histories associated with their grandparents and earlier generations through verbal accounts, illustrations, material traces, and sensory details. *Postmemory* thus provides a way to examine how the books represent the relationship between personal family histories and the younger generation's engagement with an unexperienced past.

Erll's (2011) account of cultural memory further clarifies the mediated nature of this relationship. Erll emphasizes that memory does not exist independently of the media and cultural practices that represent the past and make it accessible. Narratives, images, and other

cultural forms construct memory by selecting, organizing, and interpreting elements of the past. They do not simply preserve an established account; they shape how individuals and communities remember and understand historical experiences. Applied to children's books, this perspective highlights the interaction of verbal and visual modes and how their narrative and compositional organization mediates inherited memories. The books are therefore considered not merely as vehicles for transmitting family histories, but as cultural forms through which these histories are represented and reinterpreted for younger generations. Erll's approach also clarifies why transmission cannot be understood as the unchanged transfer of memories: as experiences move across generations and media, their representation is necessarily shaped by the forms through which they are recalled and communicated.

While Hirsch and Erll foreground the intergenerational and cultural mediation of memory, Casey's (2000) phenomenological account of place-memory highlights its embodied and spatial dimensions. Challenging approaches that locate remembering exclusively within the mind, Casey argues that memory is grounded in lived bodily experience and in the places where experiences unfold. He describes remembering as an "abiding and uncompromising implacement in the world" (Casey, 2000, p. 144), emphasizing memory's inseparability from spatial existence. Places are not simply settings in which past events occur; they participate in the formation and persistence of memories. Casey further observes that memories remain connected to the places in which they "come to inhere so deeply" (p. 215). This understanding is particularly pertinent to experiences of displacement, in which the loss of physical access to a place does not necessarily dissolve the attachment formed through inhabitation and lived experience. Memories may remain oriented towards places that have been abandoned, destroyed, or rendered inaccessible. Place-memory consequently offers a way to examine how displacement affects not only access to a dwelling but also the spatial contexts through which personal and family experiences acquire continuity. In the three books, Asia Minor, Malta and Kyiv are represented not simply as geographical settings but as places encountered through inherited accounts, images, objects and sensory recollections. The younger generations' relationship with these places is consequently mediated by the memories of those who inhabited them.

Research on the representation of traumatic and inherited histories in children's literature provides a further context for this study. Howorus-Czajka (2016) examines Polish picturebooks about the Second World War, considering how artistic styles represent persecution, concentration camps, hunger, fear and family loss. Papp (2023) explores the relationship between visual storytelling, historical accuracy and collective memory in Holocaust picturebooks. Extending the discussion beyond Holocaust representation, Khafifah and Salam (2026) apply *postmemory* to Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming*, identifying family transmission, embodied memory and narrative fragmentation as means of conveying the legacies of slavery and racial segregation. Bieber and Feldman (2025) examine how Holocaust memory moves across historical and geographical contexts into representations of contemporary migration and displacement. From a critical perspective, Tasca (2018) questions the political implications of positioning children as innocent inheritors of traumatic history, highlighting the potential depoliticization of the past. This scholarship shows that transmitting traumatic events involves questions of historical interpretation, visual mediation, and political positioning.

Taken together, Hirsch, Erll and Casey offer complementary perspectives on the representation of *postmemory*. Hirsch explains the relationship between later generations and an unexperienced past; Erll illuminates the cultural and multimodal forms through which that past is mediated and reinterpreted; and Casey connects memory, embodied experience, and

place. This approach lets the study examine *postmemory* as an evolving relationship between generations, shaped by how the past is narrated, visualized, encountered, and reconstructed.

2. Inherited Memory: Intergenerational Relationships and Continuity

Across *My Tzieri, 1922*, *The Memory Cake*, and *The Sunflowers Babushka Planted*, inherited memory is constructed through different intergenerational pathways, as children encounter an unexperienced past through family relationships, stories, material traces, sensory practices, and recurring visual motifs.

In *The Sunflowers Babushka Planted* (2024), inherited memory begins with Tania's intimate relationship with her grandmother, established long before the war. Tania lives with "her mama and papa and babushka," while her grandmother "took tender care of Tania" and "they read stories together for hours." The spread's composition contrasts the enclosed domestic space on the left with the natural landscape beyond the open window on the right. The warm pastel color palette creates an intimate atmosphere, while the vibrant yellow sunflowers draw attention and connect the interior with the exterior through the green foliage echoed in the rug. The characters' downward gazes converge on the open book, foregrounding shared reading as a way to transmit family memory. The flowing curtains introduce additional directional vectors, visually linking the domestic setting to the sunflower landscape.

This relationship takes on broader symbolic significance in the park scene, where Babushka "held her hand the whole way there" and they admire the sunflowers together. Her explanation that the seeds are "safe in the center of each blossom" and will "become flowers themselves the following year" introduces a metaphor of intergenerational continuity. The visual association between Babushka holding Tania and the sunflowers establishes the flowers as an early sign of protection, continuity, and transmission. Yet, as Young (2002) demonstrates in his discussion of Holocaust memorialization, the past may remain present through traces, absences, and visual after-images, rather than through its complete recovery or representation. The sunflowers then serve this function: as Tania, after her displacement, can no longer share everyday experiences with her grandmother, the flowers remain as a material and visual trace of their shared past. Their recurrence throughout the narrative keeps this connection visible: the flowers recall Babushka's presence and the memories associated with her, while their continued presence in Tania's surroundings links those memories to her life after displacement. The sunflowers therefore become more than a recurring natural image. They provide a visual point of continuity between generations, through which Babushka's absence and her enduring place in Tania's life are represented.

This continuity is abruptly disrupted when the narrative announces that "when Tania was six, a war began." Although Tania "did not know what war was," she apprehends its consequences through the sudden need to leave her home. The child has neither direct experience nor historical understanding of the event, yet its consequences enter her lived experience. The contrast between the verbal and visual narratives intensifies this rupture. The text adopts Tania's limited perspective, presenting war through her inability to comprehend it. The illustration, however, extends this account by introducing two tanks behind the city's classical buildings. Their presence creates a visual record of historical violence that exceeds the child's verbal understanding. Baumert's muted sepia and pale-blue palette lends the scene a retrospective, almost spectral quality, while the tanks remain unmistakable signs of military threat. On the right, a large leafless tree dominates the composition. Beneath it, Tania and her grandmother move away, carrying a basket. Their small scale against the tree and the military machinery foregrounds their vulnerability, while their movement establishes a directional vector of departure. The juxtaposition of the barren tree and the departing figures associates the

landscape with loss and displacement, rendering flight as a physical experience inscribed in space.

The departure also ruptures intergenerational continuity. The family leaves "almost everything, including Babushka, who was too old to travel," while Mama takes with her "a handful of silver teaspoons." Tania cannot take her grandmother, so the teaspoons function as material traces of the abandoned home. At the same time, the sequence "down the stairs… across the city… to the train" transforms displacement into a series of physical movements. Sonnleitner's (2024) concept of biographic objects is useful here because it explains how possessions acquire significance through the relationships and experiences associated with them. The teaspoons therefore do more than evoke the past: they provide a tangible link to a domestic world disrupted by war, enabling Tania to reconnect with aspects of her grandmother's presence in the present.

In *The Memory Cake*, inherited memory also emerges through an intergenerational relationship, but is mediated primarily through place, storytelling, and embodied sensory experience. The child's arrival in Malta and Nanna's welcome at the "red front door" connect physical space with family memory. The illustrations, with their Maltese limestone buildings, colorful gallarija, church dome, plants, cats, and bougainvillea, construct Malta as a space of familiarity and belonging.

This image is subsequently contrasted with Nanna's childhood during the war: "The building above us was hit," while "our shelter was choked with thick clouds of dust." The shelter is thus transformed from a space of protection into a space of danger. The illustration reinforces this shift through its muted, dark color palette, dominated by dust-filled shadows, which contrasts with the warmer colors of the present-day scenes and establishes a distinct visual register for the wartime episode. The composition places the children within the confined shelter, while their gestures of covering their ears foreground their bodily responses to the explosion. Nanna's isolated figure, surrounded by darkness and dust, further emphasizes her vulnerability. In this sense, the scene resonates with Caruth's (1996) understanding of trauma as an experience that resists full comprehension in the moment and persists through its belated return in memory and representation. Through Nanna's voice and the picturebook's visual reconstruction of her childhood, the granddaughter encounters the past through verbal testimony and visual re-presentation. The illustration draws attention to the children's immediate, embodied experience of the bombing, complementing the verbal account and conveying sensory dimensions the narration alone does not articulate.

In *My Tzieri, 1922*, inherited memory is likewise grounded in the grandmother's experience, but is mediated through family practices, sensory memories, and material traces. The historical past of the Asia Minor Catastrophe enters the child's present through everyday activities. The grandmother preserves the memory of home through the taste of "maridopita" (a traditional fish pie) while embroidery provides another form of transmission: "I took a needle. I embroidered a turtle and an owl." The grandmother's practice and the granddaughter's participation make inheritance embodied rather than exclusively verbal, a relationship that Stephanidi reinforces visually by depicting the grandparents as a young couple in a monochromatic, photograph-like style. This visual reconstruction connects the granddaughter's present engagement with the memories to the grandparents' earlier lives.

The grandmother and grandfather appear as younger figures, rendered in fine pencil lines and a predominantly monochromatic palette of black, grey, and white, with subtle tonal variations created through shading. This restrained palette evokes the visual appearance of old photographs and family documents. The surrounding vegetal elements, particularly the thin branches and small buds, extend across the composition as organic vectors, guiding the viewer's

gaze between the two portraits and towards the small bird. Their flowing, incomplete lines create visual continuity, connecting the figures within a shared space. This delicate, evocative visual setting, combined with the close framing, establishes an intimate atmosphere and brings the grandparents' younger selves into the granddaughter's present act of remembrance. The phrase "This was my grandmother" intensifies the tension between presence and absence: the past tense signals loss, while the image preserves the grandmother's presence. Displacement emerges through the relationship between the grandmother's testimony and the accompanying illustration. Recalling the Turkish invasion, the narrator describes how «they rushed to flee in panic, and my mother followed close behind». The colloquial expression conveys the urgency of forced departure, while the reference to family members situates displacement within a shared experience of flight. The account further recalls that "the icons they carried with them could not be taken onto the boat because it was so overcrowded". This detail reveals the material constraints of escape, as even emotionally significant religious objects had to be abandoned.

The illustration reinforces this account by juxtaposing the ornate iron railing in the foreground with the passenger ship beyond it. The railing marks the boundary of a familiar domestic space, while the ship suggests the impending departure from it. The small bird, poised on the railing, introduces subtle movement, contrasting with the solidity of the iron structure and anticipating departure across the sea. Rather than depicting the refugees directly, the image evokes displacement through spatial distance and visual details that invite recollection. The contrast between the familiar foreground and the distant vessel makes departure feel like both physical separation and the start of an uncertain journey. In this way, the illustration does not simply reproduce the grandmother's testimony but offers a visual fragment through which the younger generation can approach an experience it did not live.

Across all three books, inherited memory is not presented as the unaltered transmission of historical knowledge, but as the younger generation's encounter with an unexperienced past through relationships, fragments, and material forms. The books' multimodal forms mediate inherited memory through verbal and visual narration, image–text interaction, and material and sensory elements. Verbal accounts communicate previous generations' experiences, while illustrations reconstruct events and places inaccessible to the child, as in *The Memory Cake*, where Nanna's wartime childhood is visually recreated. Images also extend verbal accounts: in *The Sunflowers Babushka Planted*, the tanks make the threat of war visible beyond Tania's limited understanding. Finally, material and sensory elements connect the past with family life in the present: the silver teaspoons, memory cake, food, and embroidery preserve traces of familial relationships and domestic practices.

3. Material Memory: Objects, Sensory Practices, and Material Traces

Sturken (1997) emphasizes that cultural memory is shaped through the images, objects, narratives, and commemorative practices that represent, interpret, and negotiate the past. From this perspective, memory is not simply preserved but continually reconstructed through cultural forms that give meaning to experiences of loss and trauma. This perspective is particularly relevant to picture books, where visual and material elements can give tangible form to traces of the past. Across *My Tzieri, 1922*, *The Memory Cake*, and *The Sunflowers Babushka Planted*, material memory takes diverse forms, as objects, food, artistic practices, sensory experiences, and recurring visual motifs mediate the younger generation's engagement with an unexperienced past.

In *The Sunflowers Babushka Planted*, this process is particularly evident in the transformation of everyday materials into visible reminders of a lost home. The family's displacement is initially associated with the restrictive environment of the refugee camp, but

Mama's sunflowers gradually transform this space. In Sturken's (1997) terms, cultural forms do not simply preserve existing memory; they help reconstruct the past and give it material form. The painted flowers therefore do more than represent Ukraine; they recreate an element of the family's former world within the experience of exile. The flour sack, initially tied to the family's material needs under displacement, is repurposed by Mama as a surface for artistic expression. By painting sunflowers on it and turning it into a curtain, she changes both its function and its significance. The flowers evoke Babushka and the family's connection with Ukraine, bringing an element of their former life into their present surroundings. The sack thus connects the immediate experience of displacement with an inherited memory of home. Its transformation shows how memory can be sustained and communicated through everyday objects and acts of making, even when the place those memories belong to is no longer accessible.

The illustration reinforces this transformation through composition, scale and color. The painted sunflowers rise above the small figures of Tania and Mama, occupying much of the visual field. Their enlarged scale gives them particular visual prominence, contrasting with the vulnerability of the displaced family. This contrast is further emphasized by the shift from the muted greys and earthy tones of the camp to the vivid yellows and oranges of the flowers. The warm colors interrupt the subdued palette of the surrounding environment and draw attention to the sunflowers as the scene's central visual element. They bring the memory of Babushka and the family's former home into the present setting, establishing a visual connection between past and present. The flowers do not remove the reality of displacement; they make the family's continuing attachment to home visible within it.

Material continuity becomes particularly evident through the recurring motif of the sunflower. At the beginning of the narrative, Babushka and Tania "marveled at the cheerful sunflowers." The flowers initially suggest protection, continuity, and intergenerational connection. After displacement, the same motif reappears in material and artistic form within the refugee space. It is no longer simply part of Kyiv's landscape but is recreated within the family's experience of exile. This transformation culminates when Tania "saw Mama's sunflowers at the window, smiling at them" and "smiled back." The personification of the flowers makes them more than decorative elements: they become part of Tania's emotional experience and her renewed sense of familiarity. The window simultaneously functions as a boundary and a mediating threshold between inside and outside. Rather than looking toward a landscape that is no longer home, Tania encounters a recreated element of that landscape within her new surroundings. The family therefore does not simply remember Ukraine; they materially reconstruct an element of it at the refugee camp. The phrase "Mama's sunflowers" further marks the movement of the motif across generations—from Babushka's childhood memory, through the family's shared experience, to Mama's creative act for Tania. The sunflower thus becomes a material form through which memory is both inherited and transformed.

In *The Memory Cake*, material memory is similarly constructed through everyday domestic objects, ingredients, and sensory practices that connect Nanna's wartime childhood with her granddaughter's present. The process begins in the "cluttered kitchen," a materially dense space filled with objects and cooking utensils. The kitchen is not merely a setting but a space in which intergenerational memory is enacted through everyday practices. The cake's preparation makes this relationship immediate. The sequence "She cracks; I pour. I fold; she stirs" places grandmother and granddaughter within the same embodied activity, activating memory through movement, touch, and participation. At the same time, "The scent of vanilla swirls" introduces smell as another dimension of remembrance. The illustration makes this invisible sensation visually perceptible through faint, swirling white lines and soft trails of

vapor rising from the mixing bowl and the prepared baking pan. Their curved movement through the kitchen, passing Nanna and the young girl, gives the aroma a spatial presence and connects the different elements of the scene. The warm, golden hues of the kitchen further reinforce this sensory atmosphere, associating the smell of vanilla with warmth and domestic familiarity. The combination of verbal description, flowing lines, and warm colors brings smell into the picturebook's visual narrative. More importantly, the aroma connects the present act of baking with memories of Nanna's past. Smell thus becomes a sensory link through which family experience is recalled and shared across generations.

The significance of these materials becomes clearer when Nanna recalls that "The enemy almost starved us into surrender." Hunger takes concrete material form in the empty containers labeled "FLOUR," "SUGAR," and "EGGS"—the very ingredients grandmother and granddaughter now use together. Their juxtaposition establishes a temporal relationship between deprivation and abundance: materials once associated with scarcity and survival are transformed in the present into elements of family togetherness and celebration. The reference to the "Santa Marija ships," which carried the food they desperately needed, further embeds these ordinary kitchen materials within Nanna's wartime experience.

LaCapra's (2001) distinction between *acting out* and *working through* becomes particularly useful. Rather than simply repeating the traumatic experience of hunger, the narrative recontextualizes its material traces within a present-day intergenerational practice. The cake becomes a material mnemonic form through which the past can be encountered and reworked. The recipe does not preserve Nanna's experience as a fixed historical record; instead, it provides a practice through which that experience is revisited and given new meaning. The statement "Today, we bake my special cake!" marks the movement from narrated memory to embodied action.

The granddaughter therefore does not simply listen to Nanna's experience but participates in a practice through which the memory of deprivation acquires a different significance in the present. In this sense, baking can be understood as a form of *working through*: the traumatic past is neither erased nor repeated, but recontextualized within an intimate intergenerational practice. The material act of baking transforms an inherited memory of hunger into an experience of connection, continuity, and family togetherness.

The illustrations reinforce this transformation. The warm, richly populated kitchen of the present contrasts with the darker, more muted wartime scenes, creating a clear emotional shift from deprivation and uncertainty to warmth, security, and familial connection. Yet the bowl, ingredients, mixer, cake, and sensory atmosphere establish continuity between these temporal layers. Material memory therefore does not reside in an isolated object; it emerges through the relationships among objects, bodies, sensory experience, narrative, and place.

In *My Tzieri, 1922*, material memory is conveyed through the old family photograph mentioned in the text, the granddaughter's artistic materials, empty chairs, the closed door, and natural elements. These details evoke a family world disrupted by the Asia Minor Catastrophe. The text begins when the grandmother looks at an old black-and-white photograph, which provides a material trace of a past the granddaughter never experienced. Yet the photograph preserves only a fragment of that world. Through narration, the grandmother supplements its visual limitations with memories of colors, tastes, and appearances, recalling the "soft red of the watermelon" of her dress and the "brown sweet" of her hair. The granddaughter subsequently translates these recollections into painting, using canvas and pigments to construct her own image of the inherited past. She does not simply reproduce the photograph but imaginatively reconstructs what lies beyond it. The statement that the grandmother's father "did

not fit in the canvas" foregrounds the limits of visual representation: the remembered past exceeds the boundaries of the granddaughter's artistic reconstruction.

The illustrations introduce a further tension between the narrative reconstruction of the past and the visual representation of absence. The image of the empty wooden chairs scattered across the courtyard, the closed entrance, and the overgrown vegetation evokes a domestic space from which its former inhabitants have disappeared. The chairs suggest interrupted everyday life, while the closed door marks the separation from the home that displacement has made inaccessible. This visual emphasis on absence is counterbalanced by the subsequent full-page portrait of the grandmother's father. Although the text explicitly states that he "did not fit in the canvas", the illustration gives him an entire page, restoring his presence through visual representation. His melancholic expression, together with the small fish that appear to move across his body and the surrounding dreamlike elements, resists a straightforward documentary portrayal. The portrait does not recover the historical person as he was but gives visual form to a figure reconstructed through inherited family memory. The contrast between the empty domestic space and the prominent portrait thus brings together loss and imaginative recovery. The illustrations do not merely complement the grandmother's testimony; they also address what the shared moment of artistic expression, recalled in the text, leaves unrepresented. While the text describes the granddaughter's attempt to recreate the past through painting and acknowledges the limits of this process in the statement that her great-grandfather «did not fit in the canvas», the illustration gives visual form to the figure who could not be accommodated within that earlier artistic representation. By depicting him across an entire page, Stephanidi introduces a visual presence that exceeds the boundaries of her earlier painting. This creates productive tension between the two modes: the text emphasizes the incompleteness of the granddaughter's reconstruction, while the illustration offers another way to approach the absent figure. The image does not resolve the limitations of inherited memory or claim to recover the past in its entirety; instead, it extends the act of reconstruction by making visible what the earlier artistic expression could not contain.

The reconstruction extends to the lost homeland. The granddaughter imagines "the Polis" [Constantinople], the Bosporus, the garden, the house, and everyday life before 1922. References to turtles, hedgehogs, cats, and the garden transform the homeland from an abstract geographical location into a lived environment. The illustration participates actively in this process: branches, flowers, climbing plants, a cat, and a bird create a dense natural environment that visually evokes the garden described in the grandmother's narrative. These elements do not merely illustrate what the grandmother says; they materialize a place that the granddaughter never knew.

Across the three books, material memory therefore emerges through relationships rather than objects alone. Objects, food, images, surfaces, sensory practices, and spaces become meaningful because they connect the younger generation with traces of an unexperienced past, allowing it to be encountered and reinterpreted in the present. Sturken's (1997) account of cultural memory helps illuminate how such forms give material and representational shape to the past, while LaCapra's (2001) distinction between acting out and working through clarifies how inherited experiences can be recontextualized rather than repeated. Materiality thus becomes a principal means of representing *postmemory* as an ongoing process of encounter, transformation, and meaning-making.

4. Reconstruction: Reimagining and Re-signifying the Past

Across *My Tzieri, 1922*, *The Memory Cake*, and *The Sunflowers Babushka Planted*, reconstruction shows how inherited memory is reinterpreted rather than repeated**,** as children

rebuild the past through stories, creative activities, sensory experiences, and familiar objects, images, and spaces.

In *The Sunflowers Babushka Planted*, reconstruction represents the final stage through which inherited memory is transformed into a new relationship with the past. Rather than simply preserving what has been lost, the narrative presents memory as something that can be recreated and reshaped in the present. The book introduces this idea in its opening double-page spread, which functions as a narrative and visual prologue. On the right-hand page, the framed text describes a natural cycle: when the sunflower "is done blooming" and its petals "shrivel and brown," its head becomes heavy with "hundreds of seeds." The seeds are then dispersed by "birds and small animals" and eventually reach the ground, where they "wait for winter to end." The accompanying illustration of the drooping sunflower head releasing its seeds reinforces this sequence of decay and dispersal. The contrast between the flower's dried browns and the vibrant greens, oranges, and golds of the surrounding floral decoration also places decline alongside the visual suggestion of continued life. This cycle of flowering, decay, dispersal, and renewal serves as a metaphor for the transmission of memory across generations: what seems to disappear remains materially present in another form.

At the end of the book, the author's note adds that if one does not see signs of hope, "you can create them." The emphasis on "create" shifts memory from preservation to active reconstruction. This principle is materialized when the family transforms their temporary refugee space by painting large sunflowers on its curtains. This transformation is captured in Tania's reflection that "it felt a little bit more like a home." The phrase "a little bit more" is significant because the new space is not presented as an exact replacement for the lost home. Instead, a sense of home is gradually reconstructed through material and visual interventions. The image of Tania close to her father, surrounded by the painted sunflowers, reinforces this process of reappropriation: family presence, domestic objects, and the transformed surroundings make the refugee dwelling more habitable.

The final image, in which Babushka embraces young Tania amid a circle of abundant flowers, brings this process into symbolic form. The surrounding sunflowers form a protective circle, recalling the earlier image of the seeds that were "safe in the center." Through repetition, the sunflower becomes a visual thread connecting grandmother, mother, and granddaughter across different temporal and spatial contexts. Reconstruction, therefore, does not mean recovering the past unchanged. It means recreating its emotional and cultural meanings through new material forms. The sunflower survives by changing form, just as memory persists through continual reimagining by each new generation.

In *The Memory Cake*, the final spread brings the process of reconstruction to its fullest expression, transforming a painful memory of wartime suffering into a celebration of collective memory, continuity, and survival. The illustration places the festa of Santa Marija at the center of the visual composition, with colorful fireworks illuminating the Maltese night sky above the town and its church. The fireworks are significant because they visually reactivate the historical memory Nanna narrates: the arrival of the Santa Marija convoy in 1942, when the population finally received the food it desperately needed. Thus, the same date and cultural celebration connect Nanna's wartime childhood with her granddaughter's contemporary experience.

The visual contrast with the earlier war scenes is particularly important. Previously, the sky and surrounding spaces were dominated by smoke, dust, darkness, and destruction. In the final spread, this same visual space is transformed through light, color, and movement. The fireworks replace the visual signs of bombing with signs of celebration. This does not erase the traumatic memory; rather, it reconstructs its meaning. An event remembered through fear and hunger can, in the present, be recalled through survival, communal celebration, and hope.

Reconstruction also takes place through the repetition of Santa Marija. What was once a historical moment experienced by Nanna becomes an annual cultural practice shared with the younger generation. The granddaughter therefore encounters the past not as a distant historical fact, but through a living tradition that continues in the present. The final imagery also connects the fireworks with the warmth and golden light surrounding Nanna and her granddaughter as they complete the Memory Cake. The cake and the festa consequently function as parallel material and cultural practices through which the past is reactivated. The final spreads show that reconstruction is not a return to the past but its transformation into a shared experience of the present. Through celebration, food, storytelling, and visual continuity, Nanna's traumatic memory becomes part of an intergenerational cultural memory that can be carried forward without losing its connection to the historical event.

In *My Tzieri, 1922*, reconstruction is presented not simply as a return to a lost past but as an active process of reassembling family history from fragments. The book's visual language further emphasizes this incompleteness. The interaction between Stephanidi's text and illustrations represents the material and psychological dimensions of refugee settlement in Rafina after 1922. In the chapter "In Rafina", the narrative describes the precarious conditions confronting the displaced family, who are initially given a bare plot of land and canvas supported by poles. The rapidly constructed refugee houses resemble "children's building blocks", while the phrase "Neither windowpanes nor flooring..." emphasizes the absence of basic facilities. These details convey the material deprivation and instability that shape the refugees' first attempts to establish a new home. At the same time, communal labor and the grandfather's evening readings of Homer's Odyssey introduce continuity into their disrupted lives.

The accompanying double-page pencil illustration extends this account beyond the conditions of physical settlement. The upper section depicts a modest house with an unglazed window, echoing the textual description of unfinished accommodation. A potted plant on the windowsill suggests an attempt to establish domestic life despite the precarious surroundings. The lower section presents the grandmother resting her head, her figure interwoven with vines, birds, and peacock feathers. These organic motifs contrast with the unfinished architecture above, introducing a visual dimension of memory and inward reflection. The composition juxtaposes the material work of constructing a home in the present with the persistence of an emotional attachment to the past. Displacement therefore involves not only reconstructing domestic space but also inhabiting a new place while carrying memories of the one left behind.

The final genealogical composition extends this process from individual memory to the representation of intergenerational continuity. The names, portraits, dates, and handwritten arrows connect successive generations and transform dispersed family fragments into a visible history. Instead of following the rigid structure of a conventional family tree, the irregular lines create an organic chain that suggests continuity despite historical rupture. The genealogy therefore does more than document family relationships: it visually reassembles a history disrupted by displacement and loss and makes its continuation visible in the present.

This movement can be further understood through Felman and Laub's (1992) account of testimony as a relational process rather than a simple transmission of factual information. The grandmother's experience becomes communicable through narration, while the granddaughter's response—listening, imagining, painting, and ultimately reconstructing the family history—extends that process across generations. Testimony therefore does not end with the telling of the past; it generates a response through which the past acquires renewed meaning. In *My Tzieri, 1922*, this response takes material and visual form.

Reconstruction consequently transforms memories of persecution, displacement, and loss into a testimony of endurance. The genealogical chain suggests that although violent uprooting disrupted lives and severed connections to place, it did not end the family's history. The descendants continue the chain by carrying names, stories, practices, and memories into subsequent generations. Reconstruction thus becomes an act of resistance to forgetting and disappearance: the past is not recovered unchanged but reassembled so that loss becomes part of an ongoing history of survival**.** The progression from photograph to narration, from artistic creation to genealogy, ultimately shifts the meaning of memory from preserving what has been lost to continuing what survives.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of *My Tzieri, 1922*, *The Sunflowers Babushka Planted*, and *The Memory Cake* demonstrates that contemporary children's books represent *postmemory* as a dynamic, material, and multimodal process, rather than as the simple transmission of an inherited historical narrative. Across the three works, experiences of war, displacement, hunger, loss, and forced separation become accessible to younger generations through intergenerational relationships and through the material, spatial, sensory, and visual forms in which the past is represented and re-signified.

The three analytical dimensions—Inherited Memory, Material Mediation, and Reconstruction—reveal a progressive movement through which an unexperienced past becomes meaningful in the present. Inherited Memory establishes the intergenerational relationship through family narratives and traces of the past. Material Mediation makes these traces perceptible through objects, food, images, artistic practices, sensory experiences, and spaces. Reconstruction, finally, demonstrates that inherited memories are not simply preserved but creatively reassembled and given new meanings.

The three books illuminate this process in distinctive ways. In *My Tzieri, 1922*, fragments of family history become a genealogical narrative of survival, as names, portraits, dates, images, and artistic reconstruction make continuity visible despite historical rupture. In *The Sunflowers Babushka Planted*, the sunflower becomes a recurring material and visual motif through which the memory of Kyiv is recreated within exile, transforming loss into renewal, belonging, and hope. In *The Memory Cake*, food, cooking, and the celebration of Santa Marija transform wartime hunger into a shared cultural practice of survival and continuity. Across the three works, reconstruction therefore does not restore the past unchanged; it enables its emotional and cultural meanings to continue in new forms.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the children's book's materiality and multimodality are central to the representation of *postmemory*. Objects, images, sensory practices, spaces, color, visual motifs, and sequential structures do not merely illustrate inherited memories; they participate in their reconstruction and re-signification. In these books, the past is never inherited whole. It reaches younger generations in fragments, carried across time through the flavors of remembered lives and the flowers that outlive their planters. These delicate traces embody *postmemory*: a relationship with experiences never personally lived but imaginatively reconstructed through the stories, images and material remnants of previous generations. What has been lost thus finds new forms of presence. Memory becomes not simply an inheritance to be received, but a connection to be nurtured, interpreted, and given new life in the present. In this way, postmemory continues to grow between generations.

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